

Fantastic Feast (Matthew 22:1-14)

Jesus's parable emphasises that God invites everyone to the great wedding banquet of His Son. But the parable also warns us that if we do not respond correctly we will miss out on this fantastic opportunity.

Self-Isolation Lottery

With the rapid rise in Covid cases in Thanet recently, more and more people are being asked to self-isolate, because they have been in contact with someone who has had Covid.

This has been particularly the case amongst school children. On Monday, both my daughters were in classes in school, where other pupils were told to go home and self-isolate immediately.

My oldest daughter was in a lesson, when the teacher received an email. He suddenly looked very worried. Then he looked up and said, I have some bad news. So and so and so and so have to go home now to self-isolate.

Then soon after he received another email telling him to send home another pupil to self-isolate. The whole thing feels a bit like a lottery. Who will have to self-isolate next? Anyone could be the next one to be kicked out of school for the next couple of weeks through no fault of their own.

In the reading we've just had, Jesus tells a parable, where at the end everyone is sitting down at a fantastic feast. Then the king comes in, picks on one person and kicks him out - into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. At first glance this also feels a bit like a lottery. Who is going to be randomly selected to be kicked out next?

And then Jesus says in verse 14:

"For many are invited, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14)

Which again seems quite random!

Yet, actually, the purpose of the whole passage and teaching is to show us how to make it to the fantastic feast and not be kicked out! If Advent is to remind us that as Christians we are looking forward to something better, this parable is showing us how **not** to miss out on the something better.

Generous Invitation 1: The Fantastic Feast - 22:2-4

In the parable as Jesus tells it, the feast is described first of all as a 'wedding banquet' for the king's son. Now we know in this country, that the wedding of one of the queen's children is a big and important affair. Vast numbers of the country will sit down and watch the royal wedding and it will be a grand and magnificent. To be invited to the wedding itself would be an enormous privilege and would no doubt be one of the most important highlights of your life! You wouldn't want to miss out!

But, the response of the guests in the parable is that they refused to come!

Now, of course this is a parable. The fantastic feast is meant to point to something else. The king of course stands for God. And if you look back at the end of chapter 21, Jesus has clearly implied that he is the son of the landowner, who also represented God, in the previous parable. So, the wedding banquet of the Son, is the wedding feast of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.

In Judaism and the New Testament this was a way of referring to the great future hope of being with God forever more. We have seen that Revelation ends with a wedding, where the heavenly resurrected Jesus is the groom and the church is his bride.

What is at stake here is something far greater than being a guest at a royal wedding, as fantastic as that might be. What is at stake is a place in God's eternal kingdom, a place at the most fantastic feast of all the great heavenly banquet that is eternal life with God. How can you even consider missing out on such a wonderful opportunity. How could you turn down such an invitation?

Yet, in the parable people Jesus focuses on the people who do miss out as a warning to his listeners and to us not to fall into the same trap.

So, how do people miss out?

How to miss out 1: Self-centred ignoring - vs. 5

The first set of rejections come in verse 5. Here we are told that some ignore the invitation and instead focus on their field or business. In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells a similar parable, where this is really the only reason given for rejecting the invitation, whilst here it is just a reason in passing.

Jesus was saying to some of the temple authorities. You are so interested in your own business interests and how to make money, that you are not taking the time to listen to what God is saying to you. You are worried about missing out on making money, but the result is that you will miss out on a place in God's heavenly banquet!

Today the same is true. Many youngsters may grow up as a part of the church, but rather than listening to God's message they become distracted with their own self-centred interests and ignore God's more important message. They become distracted by sport on Sunday, getting a job that means working on Sundays and missing church, spending all their time studying to pass exams and no time considering the claims of God.

In the same way adults can allow worries about their business, jobs or finances to push out a chance to consider the invitation of God, so that they never truly respond.

Jesus warns us. Do not let self-centred present concerns stop you embracing God's wonderful invitation to future glory.

How to miss out 2: Violent rejection - vs. 6

The second type of rejection is quite shocking. These people did not just ignore the invitation they beat up and killed the messengers. This seems like a very strange turn of events in the parable, although given that the invitee is a king it is tantamount to a revolution against his power.

And in the context where Jesus tells the story, this part of the parable has an immediate application. Because at the end of chapter 21 we are told that his listeners were looking for a way to kill Jesus and indeed, very soon they will arrange for Jesus to be crucified.

Even today there are those who are so opposed to the Christian message that they will mistreat the messengers. All around the world Christians are in danger of mistreatment, imprisonment and even death for inviting people to God's amazing heavenly banquet.

Jesus is clear, for those who maintain that attitude there will be judgement. The reference in verse 7 is often seen as a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70, which is being portrayed as God's judgement on the city in that era for its violent rejection of God's chief messenger.

You may think that you have power to reject and destroy God's message. But don't be fooled God will have the last word and will be the ultimate judge. No rebellion against him in whatever form will ultimately succeed.

Generous Invitation 2: Everyone Welcome - vs. 8-10

But, the response of the king in the parable is not just judgement, but to extend the invitation. Now it is not just those you would expect to invite to the wedding of his son - it is anyone they can find.

So, the invitation goes out to everyone, good and bad. This continues the theme that those who reject Jesus's message will be replaced in God's kingdom by those who accept it.

This idea runs throughout Matthew's gospel. Jesus tells people that those considered too wicked to be God's people, the tax-collectors and prostitutes were embracing the invitation. He also tells that those who were not Jewish enough, were embracing God's invitation, but the religious Jews were often the ones rejecting it.

So many people today dismiss the Christian message as only for religious people. But that is simply wrong. You cannot say to Jesus, I am not religious, or I am not good enough, or Christianity is not for my culture, race, gender or sexuality. This is a universal and inclusive invitation for all.

Everyone is welcome to come to the great heavenly banquet, if only they would accept the invitation. Don't ignore the invitation, don't reject the invitation grab it with both hands. This is more than an opportunity of a lifetime - it is an opportunity for eternal life.

How to miss out 3: Belonging without Becoming

But that is not the end of the story. The Christian invitation is radically inclusive, but there is a very important warning at the end. Everyone is invited, but you have to dress for the occasion if you expect to stay!

When the king comes into the feast he sees someone not wearing wedding clothes. He asks how he got in without wedding clothes, but the man is speechless. So, the king has him thrown outside into the darkness.

This is the final way to miss out on the fantastic feast. Clearly if you go to a wedding you would expect to get dressed up for the occasion. That was true in Jesus's day - even if it simply meant going in freshly cleaned clothes rather than dirty ones!

But, what do the 'wedding clothes' in the parable represent. What does it mean to not be dressed in 'wedding clothes' and so miss out on your place in God's eternal kingdom and feast even at the last moment?

I think the best way to understand it is this. The man who is at the feast without wedding clothes represents someone who belongs to the church, but has not become a follower of Christ.

Jesus says that to become a Christian is to repent and believe. That is choose to seek to live life the way Jesus calls us and to trust in that certain hope of a place in God's banquet. Such a life will include belonging to the church, meeting with God's people and playing your part.

But, it is possible to belong and not become. You can be a part of the church meeting with other Christians, even playing a significant part in church life - even becoming a vicar, bishop, archbishop or pope. You can do all that without truly becoming a follower of Christ. You may look like a Christian on the surface, but in your heart you have not repented and believed.

Back in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned:

""Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"
(Matthew 7:21-23)

Now lets be clear. This is not saying that if we slip up in some sin or other we will miss out. All Christians do that. It's a bit like spilling wine on your wedding clothes - God has the power to clean them again. The problem here is that the man did not put on wedding clothes in the first place. He never made that choice to become a follower of Christ.

And for some of you listening that may be you. You may be a member of St. Luke's, you may be very involved, but you know that in your heart you have never really become a Christian, you have never fully put your trust in Jesus and decided to live life following him. Being a part of the church, even being fully involved is merely belonging it is not becoming. Unless you truly become a Christian in your heart you will miss out on the one thing that truly matters a place in God's heavenly banquet.

Don't delay any longer choose to become a true follower of Jesus today.

Missing out on Christmas

Over the last few weeks, there has been great concern that because of Covid, people will miss out on Christmas. That important time with families, the rest from the normal stresses and strains of life and a chance to enjoy good food and wine.

The government have worked hard to allow as much of this as is possible or wise given the threat of the virus spread. They know that people do not want to miss out on Christmas.

God is inviting us to something much better than Christmas. A chance to be a part of the great heavenly banquet, freed from the pain and suffering of this present life and living in close intimacy with God as our true Father.

Are you doing everything possible in order to not miss out on this invitation?